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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Agricultural Research Administration
Bureau of Animal Industry

SHETLAND PONIES

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Native home - The Shetland Islands, located about 200 miles north of Scotland. These islands are rocky, rough, and generally barren in character and are subject to unfavorable climatic conditions much of the time. Rather low temperatures prevail, with feed scarce except in a few valley sections.

Origin and ancestry -

Quite old and somewhat uncertain, but it is believed that in their early history Shetland Ponies were related to other pony and small horse stock found in the adjacent territory of Iceland, Scandinavia, Ireland, and Wales.

Type -

Quite similar to that of a very small draft horse in many cases. The type varies somewhat depending on individual habitat, particularly is this true of stock raised in the home islands of the breed. In areas where feed is plentiful, there is a strong tendency for the animals to be above average size.

Disposition - Almost always very gentle. Quite amenable to handling and training.

Body characteristics -

Head moderately fine; eyes prominent; neck short and strong; shoulders well set and strong; body round and short; back wide; ribs deep and well sprung; croup fairly level and broad; quarters full; legs stout and short; bone of good quality; feet round in shape and dark in color.

Coat -

Body hair thick and long, particularly in the winter season; mane, tail, and foretop long.

Color -

Somewhat variable, with bays, blacks, and browns being common. Other colors include chestnut, gray, roan, and spotted (piebald).

Height -

Generally between 36 and 44 inches (measured at the withers).

Weight -

Usually between 300 and 400 pounds, with a pony of 40 inches height weighing about 350 pounds.

Constitution - Very hardy, longevity being a prominent breed characteristic.

Uses -

In America the principal use is as a children's pet for riding and driving. In the British Isles and the breed's homeland, Shetland Ponies are employed commonly for pack and draught purposes. Work in the coal mines is a rather general occupation for them in Great Britain.

Distribution -

Principally found in the Shetland Islands, British Isles, United States, and Canada. In the United States, Shetland Ponies are produced most generally in some of the Middle Western States, but their distribution is widespread over the country, particularly in the northern half.

Feeding

Unless the pony is being worked or ridden often and regularly, either all or most of the feed required during the spring, summer, and fall grazing seasons usually may be obtained from good pasturage. Where pasturage is inadequate, however, it should be supplemented with a small quantity of concentrates and dry roughage (generally hay), such feed to be given daily. Either oats or corn alone or a combination of oats and corn or oats and wheat bran (oats 4 to 6 parts, wheat bran 1 part) may be used satisfactorily for the concentrate portion of the ration; while a mixture of timothy and clover or other good quality dry forage of similar type and composition will meet the hay requirements. The quantity of supplemental concentrates and dry roughage needed will depend on the size and physical condition of the pony; the work done; the kind and amount of pasturage available; and related factors. Generally, the supplemental concentrates need not exceed 1 pound daily, while the quantity of hay required will be about the same or a trifle greater. During the non-grazing season and when at work, most mature ponies may be kept in good condition on 2 to 4 pounds of suitable concentrates and 3 to 5 pounds of good dry roughage. Usually, such feed should be divided into two equal portions, which are given in the morning and evening. An ample supply of clean water is necessary, of course, during all seasons of the year. Moreover, provision should be made so that all animals can have daily access to salt. Either loose or block salt is suitable for this purpose.

Breaking and Training

Ponies should be broken to the halter when quite young (about 1 month of age); then taught to stand tied and to lead. The first step in training and handling, however, which is commonly known as "gentling," should be begun when the foal is only a few days old. It should consist of talking to, rubbing, and petting the youngster for short periods of time daily. If properly done, gentling instills a spirit of confidence for mankind in the foal, makes it more receptive and submissive to the handler's wishes, and lays the foundation for success in future training work. During all the early stages of handling and training, particular care should be taken not to frighten the foal or to make it do things it does not understand. For best results, the attitude of the trainer must emphasize kindness, patience, gentleness, and firmness. Short daily lessons are always better than long ones at infrequent intervals. Moreover, only one thing should be taught at a time, each lesson should be learned thoroughly by repeating it over and over before starting another, the same specific command (such as "whoa," "back," etc.) should always be used for the particular action desired, and all equipment (halters, bridles, etc.) should be strong, serviceable, and properly adjusted.

Breaking and training to harness, which should always precede the initiation of work under saddle, are usually begun when the pony is a yearling, i.e., between 1 and 2 years of age. The first step in this procedure is to accustom the colt or filly to have harness put on and adjusted. Do this as quietly and quickly as possible, but do not have the harness fit too tight. The pupil is then taught to wear the new equipment and to be lead and driven in it without pulling a vehicle. Hitching is the next training step. It will be facilitated if a light breaking cart is available. Also, it is well to give all the early driving lessons in a quiet place (a small field or unused country lane) where the colt's or filly's attention will not be distracted by strange sounds or sights. Later it may be familiarized with everyday traffic conditions by training on a public thoroughfare. Actual work in harness usually is not done until the pony is 2 years old. When breaking to ride, the first lesson is to accustom the pupil to wearing the saddle. The saddle girth should fit rather loosely at first and it may be well to remove the stirrups. Ponies can be taught to carry weight by fastening a light bag of sand or grain over the saddle, increasing the amount of such weight gradually over a period of several days until the maximum is reached. The first riding lessons should be made with a light, but experienced, trainer in the saddle. Moreover, such work should be of short duration per lesson and at the walk always. Ponies should be at least 2 years old before breaking to ride. If ridden much before this age, they may suffer from back or leg injuries.

